

Briskness and fatigue: *Father of My Children* as melodrama, precarity and impasse

Michael Stewart [MStewart@qmu.ac.uk]

School of Arts, Social Sciences and Management, Queen Margaret University, University Drive,
Musselburgh, EH21 6UU, UK

This article examines *Le Père de mes enfants* (2009) as a family melodrama and as an example of the cinema of precarity. The article defines both of these terms and applies them to *Le Père de mes enfants*, arguing that the film effectively combines pathetic melodrama with the cinema of precarity. More specifically, it is argued that *Le Père de mes enfants* constitutes situation and impasse as they are defined by scholars of film melodrama and the cinema of precarity. Impasse is given particular substance by *Le Père de mes enfants*'s central figure, Grégoire; and via Grégoire as a maximized type, it is argued that *Le Père de mes enfants* vividly combines melodrama, impasse and charisma. Charisma is defined, and it is argued that this term can be linked to established accounts of film melodrama, as well as to the expectations made of precarious subjects. As well as Grégoire, the article considers *Le Père de mes enfants*'s distinctive form, and its later focus on Sylvia. In all these respects, it is argued that *Le Père de mes enfants* constitutes a distinctive form of impasse and the cinema of precarity, as well as an emergent form of family melodrama.

Keywords: melodrama; precarity; charisma; impasse; post-salvation

Le Père de mes enfants/Father of My Children (2009) is written and directed by Mia Hansen-Løve. It won the Jury Special Prize in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. The film is based in part on the life of Humbert Balsan (1954–2005). Balsan was a French film producer and was also the chairman of the European Film Academy. During his career, Balsan was involved in the production of over 60 films. He secured finance and distribution for a diverse range of frequently challenging films. Balsan was known for championing North African cinema and for supporting women filmmakers. Among the last of his films to be released were *Alexandria...New York* (Chahine, 2004), *L'Intrus/The Intruder* (Denis, 2004), and *Manderley* (von Trier, 2006). Balsan was a member of the Wendel family, a French industrial dynasty. His film career began in 1973, when he was cast as Gawain in Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du lac/Lancelot of the Lake* (1974). Balsan was known to have suffered from depression, and took his own life in February 2005.

Like Balsan, Mia Hansen-Løve began her film career as an actor. *Le Père de mes enfants* is the second of the five features she has directed. The first half of the film focuses on Grégoire Canvel (Louis-Do de Lencquesaing), a film producer with a full slate of films and a hectic but apparently contented family life. His production company, Moon Films, however, is close to bankruptcy. Grégoire's commitment to the survival of his various current projects, though, continues without a pause. He spends weekends with his family at their country house, and also

goes on holiday with his wife and two of his three daughters to Italy. Work intrudes on family time, causing some degree of marital tension. At last Grégoire admits to his Italian wife Sylvia (Chiara Caselli) that Moon Films faces financial ruin. He asks Sylvia if she will leave him. Sylvia reminds him of his many achievements as a producer, and tells him her love for him is boundless. The following day, Grégoire shoots and kills himself.

The second half of *Le Père de mes enfants* moves between Sylvia and she and Grégoire's eldest daughter Clémence (Alice de Lencquesaing). Clémence pursues some overheard gossip that Grégoire fathered a secret child. She discovers that Grégoire is the father of a boy (now grown up) called Moune. Moune's mother (Valérie Lang) tells Clémence that she and Grégoire split up before Grégoire married Sylvia and started a new family and have not been in touch since; and that Moune cut all ties with his father long ago. Supported by a family friend, Serge (Eric Elmosnino), Sylvia visits Moon Films and the location of one of Grégoire's current productions. She speaks, but mostly listens, to colleagues and accountants. Moon Films is massively in debt and cannot be saved. Sylvia says that her only plan is to leave Paris, perhaps to return to Italy. She and her daughters hire a taxi and drive out of Paris, probably (though this is not confirmed) en route to Bologna for a two-week Christmas break. Sylvia tells Clémence not to cry and appears positive and determined.

In the first instance, *Le Père de mes enfants* is difficult to place in terms of genre. While it is a tribute and love letter to Humbert Balsan, it exhibits few of the recurring features of the biopic. However, an examination of the film's central figure, Grégoire Canvel, who in various ways stands in for Balsan, will reveal a number of the film's residual and emergent generic features. In melodramatic terms, Grégoire is a 'maximized type' (Gledhill 1991, 211), who embodies the qualities and contradictions of the genre in which he appears. His excess, however, is not manifested in numbness or trauma familiar to family melodrama and globalised art cinema (Kerr 2010) in recent times. Instead, it is characterised by briskness and fatigue, virtuosity and charisma, and by a lack of futurity – by impasse. This impasse that characterises Grégoire and *Le Père de mes enfants* leads me to argue that the film is best theorised as a combination of family melodrama and the cinema of precarity. Moreover, in these respects, I will argue, following Berlant (2011) and others, that *Le Père de mes enfants* represents the search for a new idiom, a new language both of melodrama and precarity. Grégoire's representation and performance, as I have indicated, will be a key route by which I will arrive at this thesis. First, though, I will define family melodrama in film and the cinema of precarity, and indicate the ways in which *Le Père de mes enfants* meets these definitions.

Melodramatic impasse

The large literature on film melodrama is well summarised by Christine Gledhill (2007) in *The Cinema Book*. Gledhill's summary indicates its richness and complexity. With this in mind and for current purposes, I will suggest that the most standardised accounts of film melodrama are to be found in Neale (2000, 196–197), Singer (2001, 44–49) and Williams (1998, 65–80). Singer and Williams both produce five-fold definitions of film melodrama. Singer argues that if a film shows evidence of two of his five defining features – pathos, overwrought emotion, non-classical narrative structure, sensationalism, and moral polarity – it can be defined as melodrama. Williams argues that five recurring features of film melodrama are that: it combines pathos and action as a means of producing moral legibility; it begins and ends in

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spaces of innocence; it focuses on victim-heroes, recognising their virtue; it features characters who embody psychic roles organised around good and evil; and it uses realism to its own ends, in so doing appearing modern or contemporary.

Beyond the scholars' generally different approaches to and motivations for mapping and theorising melodrama, Singer and Williams five-fold models overlap and work well together. This is with the exception of Williams's emphasis on the 'dialectic' of pathos and action. Singer argues that most film melodramas do not depend on a dialectic of pathos and action to produce moral legibility. Instead, a distinction can be made between pathetic melodramas – high on pathos and low on action – and action melodramas, which are oriented to action but almost devoid of pathos. Both forms strive for moral clarity; but the former type tends to avoid moral polarisation in favour of complexity or 'moral antinomy' (Singer 2001, 54).

Singer also considers the distinct but not absolute differences between action and pathetic melodrama when he discusses the centrality of 'situation' to most film melodrama (2001, 41-44). This discussion is worth considering here because it makes a strong connection with Berlant's (2011) definitions of situation and impasse in the cinema of precarity, and is, I will argue, applicable to *Le Père de mes enfants*. Singer notes that Lea Jacobs (1993) identifies two types of situation in film melodrama. In what Singer calls classical melodrama (equivalent to what I refer to as action melodrama, above), situation is a 'striking and exciting incident that momentarily arrests narrative action' (Singer 2001, 41) and which is familiar to the frozen tableaux and close-ups of, respectively, stage melodrama and television soap opera. In Hollywood melodrama (equivalent to pathetic melodrama), however, situation is the 'more diffuse condition of frustration or futility spanning almost the entire plot' (43). In these pathetic melodramas, impasse is generated, action is suspended, characters experience life crises and are unable to move directly towards their goals (43).

Singer's primary interest is in the extent to which situation counts as a central defining feature of film melodrama. I want to argue, though, that the type of situation that characterises pathetic melodrama is a key feature of *Le Père de mes enfants*, as well as the cinema of precarity as Berlant defines it, and to which I will give greater definition shortly. The films in the cinema of precarity, notes Berlant, examine broadly and in minute detail 'recalibrations of relations' (2011, 192) in the state, the economy, in how people live. They dismantle the props for aspirational life-building and zone in on how different kinds of people adapt, or not, to their new situation. The cinema of precarity's aesthetic, Berlant argues, is defined by the fraying of norms: 'We observe this politico-affective condition mainly in messy situations [...] and not often in the genre of the dramatic event' (196).

Berlant uses the term situation here deliberately, giving it a social and generic definition:

I have been calling the historical present a *situation* deliberately, to develop it as a concept for tracking transactions within the elongated *durée* of the present moment [...] (A) situation is a genre of living [...] a circumstance embedded in life but not in one's control. A situation is a disturbance, a sense genre of animated suspension [...] What makes the present historical moment a situation is not just that finally the wealthy are experiencing the material and sensual fragilities and unpredictability that have long been distributed to the poor and socially marginal. It is that adaptation to the adaptive

imperative is producing a whole new precarious public sphere. (195; Berlant's emphasis).

Berlant refines her argument about situation to suggest that the cinema of precarity, in featuring characters cut off from futurity, frequently articulates impasse, what she calls 'melodramatic impasse' (203). An impasse-like situation opens and extends time. It may produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading. More specifically, Berlant theorises three kinds of impasse: a dramatic and unexpected event or loss, where one is forced to adjust, e.g. a sudden death; a 'loss of traction' (200), where one feels adrift, the normalised rules of reciprocity no longer applying; and situations which force 'improvisation and reflection on life-without-guarantees' (200) and which are experienced positively, even pleasurably, and not as a loss.

Le Père de mes enfants vividly constitutes situation and impasse as they are defined by Singer and Berlant, not only and most obviously via Grégoire, but also via Sylvia and the film's form more generally, as I will consider below. For now, I want to underline a little more the film's status as a pathetic melodrama in Singer's terms. The film clearly does not establish moral poles and asks us to recognise the impossibility of Grégoire's circumstances. Pathos, like and closely allied to situation, is dispersed across the film and peaks in the lead in to and aftermath of Grégoire's death, when Sylvia and her daughters grieve the sudden loss of their much-loved husband and father. This shocking death does not represent sensationalism as Singer defines it. However, two more of his defining features are evident in the film. Firstly, as the mid-point suicide of a central character indicates, *Le Père de mes enfants* has a non-classical narrative structure. Secondly, there is at least one clear scene of overwrought emotion, and two more muted ones.

The most overwrought scene occurs when Grégoire advises Valérie, in front of clients, that using an inexperienced runner to scout locations was a bad idea, prompting Valérie to storm from the room disgusted, but not before reminding Grégoire, forcibly, of the unavailability of the experienced scout, as well as his greater cost, and the huge number of hours she currently dedicates to Moon Films. The other emotional but not quite overwrought scenes are first, when on holiday in Italy, Sylvia threatens to return to France without Grégoire if he cannot ignore his phone and leave work behind; and second, when Clémence accuses her mother of keeping from her some ugly truths about her father, i.e. what she thought was his hidden son.

Le Père de mes enfants is also melodramatic in that, following Williams (1998), it begins and ends in a space of innocence, although Williams's emphasis on innocence needs qualifying in the contexts both of *Le Père de mes enfants* and pathetic melodrama generally. As Singer (2001) notes, pathetic melodrama more often features moral antinomy than polarisation. As such, a clear move from innocence through trauma and drama and back to innocence may by definition be muted or modified in pathetic melodrama; this is the case in *Le Père de mes enfants*. More accurately, we are offered a move from equilibrium through drama and loss, to equilibrium, the film's beginning and end sharing upbeat music and the affectivity of modern urban life. The beginning and the end point to *Le Père de mes enfants*'s status as a pathetic melodrama, as well as evident changes to this form.

Christine Gledhill (2014, 27–28) has argued that popular melodrama increasingly rejects innocence regained as the mode's logical destiny, replacing this with expressions of shame and guilt and a redistribution in the visibility of suffering. Gledhill's observations are supported by various theorists of melodrama and film. In his historical and theoretical reassessment of film melodrama, Augustin Zarzosa (2013) argues that the form's modal essence is to redistribute the visibility of suffering. In his analysis of what he calls the social-realist melodramas of Laurent Cantet, Will Higbee (2004) describes how the central male characters in Cantet's films are crushed by paternal expectation, the social gaze and shame. And Martin O'Shaughnessy (2010, 53), in his analysis of recent French cinema (including films directed by Cantet), notes how recent French films set in the workplace resort to melodramatic strategies to force hidden struggles into view.

A cinema of precarity

O'Shaughnessy's primary interest is new articulations of the political in French cinema. The films he examines focus on the workplace and family identities and relations. In Singer's (2001) terms, they are pathetic melodramas. O'Shaughnessy's work also overlaps with two recent theorisations of the cinema of precarity, by Lauren Berlant (2011) and Alice Bardan (2013). In her survey of a cross-European cinema of precarity, Bardan notes the difficulties involved in making generalisations about these types of film. She nonetheless identifies a shift from a European cinema of borders and belonging to one which unveils 'the precarious conditions of white, average, middle class, or even upper class Europeans' (2013, 73). These more recent films – a 'new cinema of precarity' (71) – Bardan argues, no longer emphasise struggles of and for national identity. Instead they evince transnational perspectives, occasionally fantasies, and focus on the development of new subjectivities.

In her definition of the cinema of precarity, Bardan is guided by Berlant (2011). For Berlant, the cinema of precarity underlines the historical present as transitional, where the 'reproduction of inherited fantasies about what it means to have a good life is [...] no longer possible' (Berlant, in Bardan 2013, 72). Precarious cinema, notes Berlant, witnesses the 'loneliness of collective singularity' (in Bardan 2013, 72), focusing on individuals who share similar styles of adjustment and adaptation to the 'new ordinariness' (72) of the precarious present. In this sense, the precarious figures in the new cinema constitute an 'affective class' (72). Moreover, this imperative to be adaptive, argues Berlant, not only produces a 'whole new precarious public sphere' (Berlant 2011, 195) – as I note above when considering Berlant's definition of situation – it is also defined by 'an emerging aesthetic' (Berlant 2011, 195).

The emerging aesthetic of the cinema of precarity, argues Berlant, follows 'bodies moving in space performing affectively laden gestures' (Berlant 2011, 201), and 'melds melodrama and politics into a more reticent aesthetic to track the attrition of what had been sustaining national, social, economic, and political bonds' (201). Berlant examines in particular French cinema's 'New realism' (201) of the 1990s, but suggests that this is a 'global style that amounts to a cinema of precarity' (201). This style, notes Berlant, is evident in the films of the Dardennes, Hooman Bahrani, Cristian Mungiu, Fatih Akin, Jiă Zhāngkē, Kelly Reichardt, Mike White, Courtney Hunt, Debra Granik and, sometimes, Michael Haneke (Berlant 2011, 295n30).

Following Bardan and Berlant, then, the cinema of precarity is globalised but may be particularly evident in European and especially French language films of the late-twentieth and

early twenty-first century. For Berlant, it combines new forms of realism, politics and melodrama. Along with Berlant (2011), other theorists have identified new, reticent, semi-minimalist forms of film melodrama (see for example, Chan 2008, Dadar 2014, and Peucker 2007). The new realism and reticent aesthetic in these films is slightly more varied than might be suggested by Berlant's cinema of precarity. For example, the immediacy, proximity and emphasis on bodies in the French films examined by Berlant (2011), O'Shaughnessy (2010) and others means that they might also constitute European Neo-Bazinianism as John Orr (2004) defines it; but this is not true of all the cinemas of precarity identified by Berlant and Barden. Many of the films that Berlant, O'Shaughnessy and Higbee (2004) examine, however (along with some of the European cinema of precarity identified by Barden), effectively combine family melodrama and the cinema of precarity; and the same is true in specific ways of *Le Père de mes enfants*.

Following Williams (1998), *Le Père de mes enfants* uses new forms of realism to its own ends and in order to appear contemporary. In scholarship and reviews, the film and Hansen-Løve's work generally are defined as a new and restrained form of realism. Hansen-Løve's approach, suggests Palmer, may be characterised as 'graceful restraint [...] organic, performer-focused [...] (U)nderstated realism' (2011, 44). Peter Bradshaw calls *Le Père de mes enfants* 'undemonstrative' (Bradshaw 2010), which, as well as unfussy, is how Gilbey (2010) describes the film. Richard Porton suggests that *Le Père de mes enfants* 's earch(es) for a distinctive cinematic style' (Porton 2010, 12).

This new style, then, is attributed here to both Hansen-Løve's craft and the film's narrative form. With regard to the latter, the director herself (in Romney 2010), as well as Ryan Gilbey (2010), suggest that *Le Père de mes enfants* maintains its brisk pace and does not miss a beat following Grégoire's death. The film's distinctive realism can also, following Palmer's description of Hansen-Løve's films, be tied to its central character, Grégoire. Moreover, not only does Hansen-Løve consider herself to be an actorly director – 'it really begins with (actors) belonging to the fiction' (Hansen-Løve, in Porton 2010, 11) – she also suggests that this actorly focus is especially strong in *Le Père de mes enfants*. She notes that both Balsan and Louis-Do de Lencquesaing came from 'the same aristocratic stratum of society' (in Porton 2010, 12), and believes that de Lencquesaing was able to 'seize the essence of Balsan' (12), intuitively capturing his manner.

Performing precarity

This is indeed the brilliance of de Lencquesaing's actorly performance. Grégoire is a vivid combination of briskness and fatigue, of charisma, virtuosity and a 'weariness of the present' (Cvetkovich, in Austin 2015, 157). As early as 1970, Austin notes, Toffler predicted that capitalist accumulation and societies based on flexibility, short-termism, choice and risk would engender a pervasive sense of fatigue, of dispossession, sadness and 'weariness of the present' (Cvetkovich, in Austin 2015, 157). Grégoire in this respect articulates the new subjectivities which Barden (2013) and Berlant (2011) argue are manifest in the cinema of precarity. Weariness of the present infects Grégoire. It is evident early in the film when the rhythm and buoyancy of his performance appears to stall and he asks Sylvia 'dis moi quelque chose de gentil'.¹ This moment is incongruous to the extent that the omnipotent father-fixer seems now isolated – lonely in Berlant's (2011, 201) collective singularity – and in need, instead of pivotal

and meeting all needs. However, it can also be characterised as the first in a series of Grégoire's deaths, and, following Austin, as the weariness that never leaves him. In this sense, the consistent rhythm and matter-of-factness of *Le Père de mes enfants* describes Grégoire's performance inseparably from the style of the film; it becomes a relentlessness, a pathology, or, following Austin, a form of political depression. The weariness of the present in *Le Père de mes enfants* is subtle – until Grégoire effectively lies down and dies – but ever-present and not denied. Denial of present depression or fatigue is how Austin (2015) characterises backward-looking therapeutic and public cultures of trauma and grief. *Le Père de mes enfants* and Grégoire's matter-of-factness, as French (2010) suggests, effectively resist sentiment. Moreover, Grégoire is haunted by the present, and for all his compulsive energy has nowhere to go, 'is blocked off from a sense of futurity' (Austin 2015, 158).

Blocked off from futurity is how Berlant (2011) characterises impasse in the cinema of precarity. Grégoire's virtuosity is also a specific expression of the cinema of precarity, and his charisma can be understood in historical terms. Moreover, I want to suggest the particular expressions of virtuosity and charisma in *Le Père de mes enfants* mean that is a contemporary version of pathetic melodrama that resists both trauma and moral polarisation, sustaining instead a melodramatic situation characterised by impasse. With regards to charisma, French (2010) describes Balsan as 'legendary', while Hansen-Løve remembers him as 'luminous' (in Porton 2010, 11). This light continues to shine via Grégoire. His entrance to the film is organised to produce a pivotal and potent figure (see Figure 1). The whimsy and energy of Jonathan Richman and the modern lovers' 'Egyptian Reggae' and especially its use of cymbals suggest a conjuring trick, in this sense, a bringing back from the dead of Balsan. Egyptian Reggae's seamless combination with a busy, sunny, city-centre Paris, along with the film's sharp and rhythmic edit produces an immediacy and an immediate affective high. This is the affectivity of Parisian life, which in its affect as well as its iconography (tricolours and tree-lined police-able boulevards) is hard to detach from nationhood and the triumph of modernity. The final cymbal we hear is perfectly timed to introduce and produce, as it were, a magician and charmer: Grégoire Canvel. The brisk rhythm of Grégoire's movement takes off from the music's tempo so that a seamless unity and focalisation are achieved – a profoundly effective man at the heart of an affective, functioning city.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Pivotal, potent and brisk: Grégoire at the heart of work, family and city (Artificial Eye).

This potency and show of brilliance, at one level, are brief and quickly show cracks – 'dis moi quelque chose de gentil'.² But they also endure. For example, in his final attempt to raise funds, Grégoire is greeted like a prince and clearly loved by his bank manager (Michaël Abiteboul), however much his charm now cannot be cashed in. In examining this luminosity, I want to suggest cautiously that a connection can be made between Grégoire's charisma and melodrama. Ostensibly, these connections are clear when we consider the historical theorisations of charisma by scholars like Peter Kaufman (2012) and Philip Smith (2000). Kaufman examines charismatic Manichean sects during antiquity, and why Augustine increasingly grew suspicious of them, coming to prefer dead martyrs to living charismatics. Smith expands on the neglected cultural parts of Weber's theory of charisma in an attempt to

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re-open and re-assess its potentially multiple meanings. Striking in both theorists' accounts are the parallels that can be drawn with dominant conceptions of melodrama, and with Grégoire as a 'maximised type' (Gledhill 1991, 211).

Both theorists argue that charisma makes the world intelligible via dualisms. Charismatic specialists, argues Kaufman (2012), 'imagined duels everywhere' (814). Smith (2000) argues that when charisma operates in Western cultures, it is part of a dualist cultural idiom (109). To sustain itself, he suggests, charisma needs evil, and frequently defines evil as an abstraction, e.g. poverty, heresy, capitalism, injustice. Culture, argues Smith, must be brought to the centre of analyses of charisma. Social psychologists, for example, 'have obscured the specifically cultural facets of Weber's complex conceptual edifice, that is to say, the essentially religious qualities of charismatic authority and its links to wider symbolic and narrative fields' (102). Moreover, various theorists of society and culture, Smith notes, have indicated the 'infiltration of the sacred into seemingly secular social and political life' (103) in late modernity; the 'centrality of binary oppositions in culture' (103); and the pervasiveness of narrative across spheres, effectively 'mythologising the concrete by aligning actors and events with plots, trajectories, destinies and moral codes' (103).

Smith's description here is close to established definitions of film melodrama, some of which I referred to earlier, which emphasise dualisms, moral legibility, and the revelation of virtue. Peter Brooks's influential account of melodrama suggests that the mode emerged within and filled a cultural void for post-sacred societies, melodrama's moral occult providing meaning and reassurance in the face of de-sacralisation (Brooks 1976, 15). This process, however, is complex, and as Smith (2000) suggests, does not constitute a clean break. Moreover, Agustín Zarzosa (2010) has argued recently that the individual in melodrama frequently signals the endurance rather than the decline of the sacred. If we accept that the sacred endures, then it is arguable that Grégoire, like the ancient charismatics examined by Kaufman, is a specialist intermediary who has unique insights into the meaning of sacred texts (Kaufman 2012, 808). The sacred in *Le Père de mes enfants* is indeed the individual as Zarzosa (2010) defines it – i.e. the individual as a transcendent or fixed point 'beyond the realm of exchange' (398). Moreover, the sacred texts into which Grégoire has special insight are perhaps both contemporary texts – the independent films he champions till his death – and historical and religious texts, two of which (the ruined chapel and the church ceiling) I'll consider shortly.

In this respect, Grégoire is, like the Manichean charismatics, an 'enterprising and [...] compelling figure(s) [...] (a) celebrated guide(s)' (Kaufman 2012, 815). How far the sacred extends in *Le Père de mes enfants* is debatable. More certain is the reach and adaptability of Grégoire's virtuosity. Until his death, he is an aristocrat of virtue and a virtuoso in the multiple realms of work and family life. Grégoire's idle boast when he leaves a police station early in the film – 'J'aimerais que vous ayez vu combien j'étais charmant!'³ – would indeed have been despised by Augustine for its apparent 'pride in acquired virtues' (Kaufman 2012, 815). In class terms, these virtues have been acquired via Grégoire's membership both of the new aristocracy, and the new new aristocracy. That is, they point to the discrete charm of the bourgeoisie, modernity's mercantile and industrial aristocracy from which Grégoire seeks to distance himself in his conversation with the young filmmaker Arthur; as well as to the

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MS suggests and has inserted: ...the realm of exchange' (398). Moreover, the sacred texts into which Grégoire has special insight are perhaps both contemporary texts - the independent films he champions till his death - and historical and religious texts, two of which (the ruined chapel and the church ceiling) I'll consider shortly.

performative, flexible aristocracy of the precariat – Grégoire as nimble operator in, master of the affective economy.

In post-Fordist, precarious societies, argues Lorey (2015), work becomes a virtuoso presentation (73). Post-Fordist modes of production are hegemonic and depend on high levels of communicative and cognitive skill, as well as a consistent ability to negotiate contingency and the unpredictable (73). Inevitably, Lorey suggests, extreme levels of personal dependency are established: 'In place of dependencies on rules and precepts, we have dependencies on individual persons in the work relationship, as well as on networks in order to get the next job as needed.' (Lorey 2015, 74–75). This in large part is the weight of the world that crushes Grégoire, a nimble, compulsive fixer of all his family's problems. As Judith Butler notes (in Lorey 2015, viii), this subject formation depends simultaneously on a sense of oneself as a brave risk-taker and as permanently insecure. Alongside this, modern governments' function as protectors of security under changed circumstances is normalised. This protection, it is clear, fails Grégoire. Indeed, as I have noted, this weight of expectation and weariness of the present attends Grégoire from early in the film, when he seems to know exactly where he is going, is defiant to his daughter Valentine (Alice Gautier) about his means which 'ne connaît pas de fin',⁴ but also asks Sylvia to 'dis moi quelque chose de gentil'.⁵ The fatigue becomes most evident, perhaps, in the overwrought scene with Valérie that I refer to above; when he consoles and embraces an actor with a troubled marriage; and when he encourages Arthur (Igor Hansen-Løve) to, like him, follow his vision, but where his conviction in this rebellious anti-inheritance fantasy of a autonomy seems spent (see Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2. A fatherly Grégoire advises Arthur, but his conviction and his vision seem spent (Artificial eye).

However, for the large part of *Le Père de mes enfants*, Grégoire's performance combines and embodies briskness and fatigue. To this extent, Grégoire is redolent of the French political cinema analysed by Martin O'Shaughnessy (2010). This cinema, notes O'Shaughnessy, is characterised by a heightened immediacy and focus on bodies (43), as well as by characters who refuse to be immobilised (42). Further, in a closely linked essay, O'Shaughnessy argues that under a contemporary mode of governance led by debt, 'the subject is opened up to constant evaluation' (2014, 85). This accords with Lorey's (2015) assessment of precarity, and may be especially applicable to Grégoire, a man hounded and undone by debt. Here, though, I am interested in Grégoire as a figure both mobilised and stilled; and in evaluation as not only pervasive but multiple in *Le Père de mes enfants*.

Impasse and evaluation

Firstly, there are two key moments in *Le Père de mes enfants* where Grégoire's briskness is stilled, and where, as Kaufman (2012) suggests of charismatics, he provides insight into the meaning of sacred texts. They are two of the few moments in the film where Grégoire seems at peace. The resonance of the family scene in the ruined chapel – where Grégoire explains the protective function of the Knights Templar, and how their assets were seized by the king – as Gilbey (2010) indicates, is hard to miss. And on holiday in the Italian church, as Wilson suggests

Commented [PP9]: Singular or plural? Does he have several families?

MS: Yes, better singular as I have it now. I was trying to be clever but only created ambiguity.

(2012, 280–281), the visual rhyme between the hand of Grégoire pointing up to the ceiling mosaic and the hand of God the Father in the mosaic is effortlessly rendered and profound in its simplicity. These moments are also, following Berlant (2011), moments of impasse, where the ‘thick present’ (198) is held open, and where Grégoire becomes more stock-taker than fixer.

The film’s resources here are history and religion. *Le Père de mes enfants* is not the only film in recent times to use Christian symbols and narratives in ways that are recognisably metaphorical, but which also move beyond this. Catherine Wheatley (2013), for example, refers to a number of recent films (including *Le Père de mes enfants*) which, while not being about Christianity, nonetheless include Christian imagery and myth as legitimate, shared resources or points of reference. Philip Smith (2000), as I have noted, in his re-assessment of charisma, argues that religion should be analysed in cultural terms and examined alongside other symbolic and narrative fields. By these terms, however much melodrama has been theorised as post-sacred (Brooks, 1976), its affected and occulted values do not constitute a clean break from Christian religion in the mode’s Euro-American incarnations.

The sacred endures in melodrama in both traditional religious ways, as well as more modern symbolic and individuated terms (this argument is supported by Cummings’s 2009 analysis of the Dardenne brothers’ films as well as by Zarzosa, 2010). However, what does not endure in *Le Père de mes enfants* is the dualist idiom central to traditional accounts of Christianity, as well as to Brooks’s (1976) theory of melodrama’s moral occult. One of the key ways in which this is indicated is the film’s lack of a salvation framework. Unusually for film melodrama, including family melodrama, no one is rescued in *Le Père de mes enfants* and nothing is saved. In this respect, Grégoire’s gesture in the Italian church is indeed beautifully simple, as Wilson (2012) suggests; but it is also open, hesitant, and, following Berlant’s (2011) third definition of impasse, imbued with a sense of possibility.

The other key evaluator in *Le Père de mes enfants* is Sylvia. It is she who, more than any other character, measures the situation. And it is she who, following O’Shaughnessy (2010, 53), sets a broken world in motion again. Returning to Berlant’s (2011) three-fold definition of impasse – a dramatic and unexpected event or loss, where one is forced to adjust, e.g. a sudden death; a ‘loss of traction’ (200), where one feels adrift, the normalised rules of reciprocity no longer applying; and situations which force ‘improvisation and reflection on life-without-guarantees’ (200) and which are experienced positively, even pleasurably, and not as a loss – the first and last of these kinds of impasse apply most obviously to Sylvia, with Grégoire being the figure more generally adrift. Grégoire’s suicide, as I have suggested, is only one part of the film’s expression of impasse, and may more accurately be defined as a ‘glitch’ (Berlant 2011, 198). A glitch, suggests Berlant, is ‘an interruption amid a transition’ (198). We and Sylvia experience the glitch, however shocking, of Grégoire’s death; we encounter ‘what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift [...] to see what is happening to systems of self-intelligibility through watching subjects getting, losing, and keeping their bearing within a thick present’ (198). Action here, argues Berlant, does not express internal states. Instead it ‘measures a situation’ (198).

Sylvia is the key figure in *Le Père de mes enfants*, who takes stock, and measures the situation. Her internal state is not completely absent in that she is given affective moments of grief, losing herself briefly among Grégoire’s possessions and lamenting that it is she, that it is her inaction that is to blame for Grégoire’s death. This is quickly dismissed by Valérie, who tells

Sylvia that Grégoire's fantasy of autonomy should be recognised as calculated – 'Il acheté un pistolet'⁶ – not romantic. Instead, what Sylvia quickly becomes in the latter half of *Le Père de mes enfants* is observer and stock-taker. Her stillness and her listening take on a powerful quality of affect. Her silence, to use Kaplan's (2009) terms, opens a space hitherto 'stifled' (163) or closed off by men and patriarchal language. In keeping with Berlant's (2011) third definition of impasse, Sylvia's strength seems only to grow as the situation unfolds and her family's destiny becomes less certain. In this sense, in the sense that Sylvia quietly takes control of events in the second half of the film, Gilbey (2010) and Hansen-Løve's assertion (in Romney 2010) that *Le Père de mes enfants* does not miss a beat following Grégoire's death is questionable; because it seems instead that a quiet, still situation-measurer has taken the place of a compulsive mover, talker and fixer (see Figure 3).

INSERT FIGURE 3

Figure 3. Sylvia's quiet, powerful response to her loss (Artificial Eye).

This shift seems all the more plain if we return to *Le Père de mes enfants*'s opening and closing parts. The film begins, as I have noted, with Grégoire apparently at the height of his charismatic powers, moving effortlessly between phone and car, work and family – an autonomous but connected male at the wheel of his car/life, seeming to know exactly where he is going. At the film's close, we return to a car and the outskirts of Paris, as well as an upbeat, affective soundtrack, this time Doris Day (a woman bankrupted by her husband) singing 'Que Sera Sera' (1956). The arrangement of the sequence, however, along with the choice of music, is significantly different. Sylvia is strong and purposeful, but not entirely certain where she is going (generally speaking: in this closing sequence the family is probably going for a short break to Bologna). She knows only that she will leave Paris. Her daughters are with her, but how long they (or Clémence, at least) will stay with her is not clear. Sylvia also rejects Clémence's desire to continue mourning Grégoire, telling her that now is not the time to visit his grave. There is no doubting Sylvia's love for Grégoire and her daughters, or the strength of her individuality. However, not only is she not the car's driver (it is a taxi), but the film performs a trick of focalisation. That is, having established the car containing the family, the ending is then edited as if we are following the car and family, but does not sustain a focus on them. We move further out of the city in a flow of traffic, holding similar cars in focus, but we are never offered an unequivocal shot of the car containing Sylvia and the girls; and are left to assume only that we view the city through the taxi's windows. A broad movement away and Doris Day's powerful voice provide continuity and a sense of ending/beginning. This is in marked contrast to the beautifully analytical and profoundly masculine, and in some ways national, opening of the film.

However, I also want to agree partially with Hansen-Løve (2010) and Gilbey's (2010) assessment that *Le Père de mes enfants* does not miss a beat. There is no simple movement, for example, from triumph to illusory autonomy to alienation, defeat and sentimental familialism. Grégoire's weariness is as ever-present as his briskness, and the film's beginning is more open than my description above suggests; Hansen-Løve's choice of music points both to Balsan's African commitments, and threatens in its whimsy to undo the triumph of Parisian modernity. Mourning, trauma and abjection are absent from *Le Père de mes enfants*'s affective ending, and, for all the family's tears, from the film too. Moreover, despite the film's book-ending, a

Commented [PP10]: French, trans in note

MS: Thanks. Done.

Commented [PP11]: Presumably??

MS: Yes, agree. Thanks.

typically melodramatic desire for a return to innocence (Williams 1998, 65) is also rejected. This, as I have noted, aligns *Le Père de mes enfants* with other recent popular melodrama which rejects innocence regained as the mode's logical destiny (Gledhill 2014, 27–28). As Gledhill notes, these melodramas replace re-found innocence with shame and guilt, simultaneously redistributing the visibility of suffering (28). *Le Père de mes enfants*'s attention to shame and guilt is evident but limited. Suffering too, while dispersed across the text (like pathos), is notably contained and seldom hyperbolic.

The film nonetheless rejects victimization and salvation narratives, and its articulation of impasse constitutes a type of redistribution – a potentially productive process which represents the search for a new structure of relations and a new idiom of and out of precarity. For Berlant (2011) and Lorey (2015), this search is evident across political and cultural domains, and manifests in the recent cinema of precarity. Berlant describes this cinema as a 'reticent aesthetic' (201). In her examples, reticence is expressed as numbness and trauma. In *Le Père de mes enfants*, the reticence is both the film's matter-of-fact resistance to melodramatic excess, and Sylvia's quiet, powerful response to her loss. However much it lacks a destiny, flirting only briefly with Bardan's (2013) transnational fantasy, Sylvia's grief has purpose and seeks 'an idiom that does not exist yet, an idiom of life tipped over in the impasse' (Berlant 2011, 214).

This is what *Le Père de mes enfants* forces into visibility. It burns a candle and keeps bright the charismatic luminosity of Grégoire, in so doing making visible and felt the impasse of the historical moment. This is one way in which Humbert Balsan's legacy lives on in *Le Père de mes enfants* – as his and Hansen-Løve's search for a language of film and life which disturbs, speaks to, and makes more of the precarious present.

Notes

1. 'Say something nice'.
2. 'Say something nice'.
3. 'I wish you'd seen how charming I was!'.
4. 'Know no ends'.
5. 'Say something nice'.
6. 'He bought a gun'.

Contributor details

Michael Stewart is Senior Lecturer in film at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. His research is focused on family melodrama in film. He has published on this subject in various journals, e.g. *Cinema Journal*, *Studies in European Cinema*, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*. He has edited *Melodrama in Contemporary Film and Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Filmography

Alexandria...New York, 2004, Youssef Chahine, France.
Lancelot du lac, 1974, Robert Bresson, France.
L'Intrus, 2004, Claire Denis, France.

Commented [PP12]: I don't think the reference to Ranciere really works here. Not that it is not convincing. But because Ranciere is dropped in rather than explained. You either need to slightly expand the Ranciere connection or make your point without it; I've taken the ref out and it changes nothing...

MS: Yes, agree thanks – and will be grateful if I can have what I now have here.

Commented [PP13]: Why do you need a ref here? Is it because of the use of the word visibility? In which case use quotation marks; otherwise explain why the reference is required.

MS: Yes agree. I'd like to refer to the 2010 O'Shaughnessy essay here, but on page 53 of it he doesn't quite use these words. So as I have it now is fine thanks.

Manderley, 2006, Lars von Trier, Denmark.

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Commented [PP14]: Add first names

MS: Thanks. Have done.

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